

Downtown Disaster

City set to move police across river

In the worst blow to downtown since Sacred Heart Medical Center left, the city of Eugene plans to move its police department across the river.

Critics charge that the \$16 million plan to buy and renovate an office building on Country Club Road for the police department will cripple downtown, defy three votes, waste money, increase polluting sprawl and congestion, increase earthquake and flooding risk and reduce police accountability while damaging civic pride.

But the City Council appeared likely to give its final approval for the rushed, controversial proposal from City Manager Jon Ruiz at its noon Wednesday meeting as *EW* went to press.

Mayor Kitty Piercy and Councilors Mike Clark, Jennifer Solomon, Chris Pryor, George Poling, Andrea Ortiz and Alan Zelenka have said they support the move. Councilors Betty Taylor and George Brown spoke against it.

Here's a rundown of the critics' arguments:

Hurts downtown revitalization. While wasting millions of dollars in failed efforts to lure employers to its struggling downtown in the past decades, the city is now moving about 300 of its own employees out of downtown.

Many successful cities champion their downtowns to fight ugly, unlivable, congested, expensive and polluting urban sprawl. But Eugene city staff, the mayor and councilors are arguing that downtown is not desirable for the city's own offices.

The police may be just the first wave of city employees to move out of downtown. Move supporters have also talked about moving the municipal court, prosecutors and social services to the same site. The 300 Country Club office building the city wants to buy would double the space the police now occupy in City Hall, and the site has room for other buildings or additions, according to city staff.

Supporters have also called for moving several hundred EWEB employees out of downtown to provide city offices after the city moves out of City Hall. If City Hall were torn down it would leave yet another

pit downtown. The city has struggled to fill other pits downtown with redevelopment for decades.

Moving hundreds of government workers could lead to the closure of downtown coffee shops, restaurants and other businesses already struggling in the down economy.

Hurts downtown safety. The police presence downtown will be greatly reduced with the move across the river.

Driving farther and through the congested Ferry Street Bridge and Coburg Road areas will mean longer response times for crimes downtown and in south Eugene. Almost 90 percent of violent crime in Eugene is south of the river.

Police officers currently drive to and from City Hall regularly, park around the building and are frequent customers at downtown coffee shops.

Sherry Schaefer wrote to the council that she relied on the police presence when she recently bought a building to renovate for her insurance agency downtown. "Having the station's presence is a significant deterrent to more crime," she wrote, opposing the move.

Defies voters. Citizens have voted three times against a new police station, but now the city is going to spend citizen money on it anyway. Critics have called for the city to refer the \$16 million move to voters.

"If it were referred to the ballot, it would fail," predicted Councilor Brown in an email to colleagues last week.

Citizens could file their own initiative to ban the move. If the city went ahead and bought the Country Club building despite the initiative effort, it would run the risk of wasting \$16 million.

Low priority. Three no votes indicate citizens don't believe a new police station is a very high priority. The \$16 million the city has squirreled away could instead be used to reduce current or future taxes, repair streets,

buy parks, build a downtown swimming pool, prevent service cuts due to increasing deficits, open jail beds, fund a homeless shelter or hire more police officers, critics argue.

Bad deal. The \$16 million the city will pay for a renovated office building in a depressed market is twice the building's current market value, according to the county tax assessor.

By comparison, the Lane Council of Governments bought the similarly sized but higher quality Aster Building downtown last year for \$6 million.

The city is now trying to sell its downtown office building at 858 Pearl for \$1.6 million. The price city staff want to pay for the office building on Country Club Road is three times higher per square foot.

The \$16 million may be just the beginning of the true cost of moving the police out of downtown. The price does not include potentially millions of needed interchange and road improvements to accommodate added traffic, the cost of leasing and operating a downtown substation, the cost of a proposed emergency onramp onto I-105 and the added time cost of police driving

to and from the isolated location. Less than 10 percent of police calls are for north Eugene, and the courts, jail and city administration are all downtown. Police time is very expensive for taxpayers with each officer costing up to \$250,000 a year when all costs are considered, according to estimates.

In addition, taxpayers will also have to pay untold tens of millions of dollars to lease city office space for decades or buy the EWEB building if the city abandons the current City Hall building, as Ruiz and the council majority also want.

Unlike downtown, the new police station will have free employee parking.

Global warming. The city has called for big reductions in its carbon footprint. But the isolated Country Club location between a freeway and golf course without nearby restaurants or coffee shops or convenient bus service will dramatically increase driving by police employees and their customers.

Driving is the city's biggest contributor to global warming.

Quaky arguments. Supporters' primary argument for the Country Club move is that an earthquake could destroy City Hall. But the city estimates that the building could be made earthquake safe for less than half the \$16 million moving price.

The Country Club building also appears far more at risk of a natural disaster. In a floodplain, the building's underground garage is subject to immersion (by storm or by earthquake dam failure) that could also block access roads. An earthquake could also make the police station impossible to reach by knocking out river bridges and freeway overpasses and ramps.

Supporters using the earthquake risk argument and need for more room arguments also make the contradictory argument that police won't actually spend much time in the building since they're mostly out on patrol.

Traffic. Snarl on the roads leading to the Country Club site is bad and getting worse. "Country Club road is terrible," said Councilor Taylor, noting no turn is allowed to it off north Coburg Road leading to a confusing, round-about detour. In addition, traffic from Duck football games and other Autzen events can leave the area in gridlock.

City staff say they could ask ODOT for a new I-105 onramp, but admit the agency is unlikely to approve it.

Less accountability. It will be harder for the city manager to supervise the police and reform their us-versus-them attitude toward the city if officers are isolated in their own remote building, critics say.

Civic shame. In many cities, the historic, dignified City Hall is a place of civic pride that celebrates democracy. Rather than focusing on restoring and updating our City Hall, city staff spent \$3 million on Portland architects for plans for a new City Hall. Those plans may never be used. City Manager Ruiz and the council are moving to instead distribute all of City Hall into leased space downtown. City staff suggest Eugene's high-ceiling, paneled, historic council chambers could be replaced with a small multi-function room with a "fold-out dais."

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